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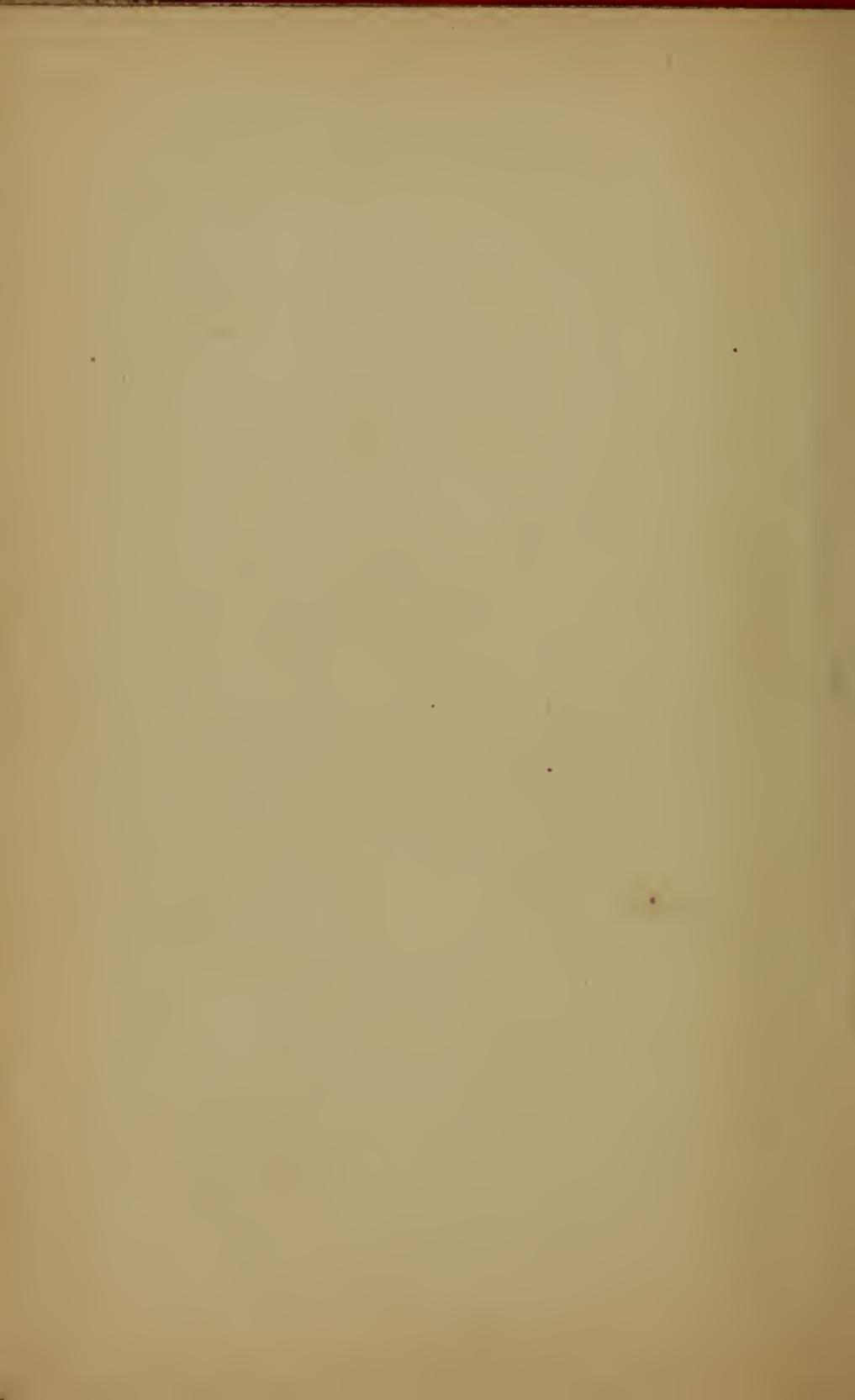
THE
INTERPRETER
with
HIS BIBLE

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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.



THE INTERPRETER WITH HIS BIBLE.

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SERVANT AND HIS LORD," ETC., ETC.



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INTRODUCTION.

THE purpose of this manual is to help students of the Bible to ascertain its true meaning. It makes no special claim to learning or originality. Most of the suggestions and rules herein given may be found in the works on Hermeneutics. But those works are usually so voluminous as to make them of little value to the ordinary Bible-student. This book is intended to meet the wants of persons who are anxious to study the Bible for themselves, but who have not had the advantages of a classical education. This class of persons is constantly increasing. There has never been so much Bible-study as there is at the present time. In all our churches are young people who desire to know the Word. It is a good sign. There can be no better work than to stimulate and direct aright this study. Our present efficiency and our hope for the future are determined by our knowledge of the Word, and our willingness to obey its precepts. Any help should be wel-

comed in this important study. The rules of interpretation here stated and illustrated should be followed by all students of the Bible. They are as necessary to the minister and the theological professor as to the uneducated young man just beginning to study his Bible. But the latter is not so likely to know them.

No space can be given here to a discussion of the value of the Bible to mankind ; though a volume might be written on that subject. Only a few words can be said with reference to its inspiration. It might be as well to take its inspiration for granted, since few will study the Bible except those who believe that it is God's Word. But so much doubt on this subject has been created by infidels, and by certain kinds of "higher criticism," that it may be desirable at this point to glance briefly at the proofs of inspiration.

I. The Divine Inspiration of the Bible is proved by the claims of its authors considered in connection with their moral purpose. Its writers and the speakers whose addresses are reported continually assert that they are the messengers and mouthpieces of the Lord. "Thus saith the Lord" is the usual preface of what we find in the Old Testament. The apostles made the same

claim for themselves, declaring that Jesus had promised them the Holy Spirit who should "guide them into all truth" (John xvi. 13). That all these authors were deceived is hardly credible in view of their clear and profound thought. To say that they were conscious deceivers is utterly absurd in view of the lofty moral tone which pervades all their writings. We must allow their claim unless it can be disproved.

II. The Divine Inspiration of the Bible is proved by its remarkable unity. It was written by about forty different authors and its composition extended over some fifteen hundred years. If it had been composed by uninspired men, it would be full of jarring opinions. But, in fact, it is one harmonious whole. We discover in it the progressive development of redemption, but no contradiction in its essential doctrines. There is diversity of expression, but unity of sentiment. In the circumstances, this could hardly be, if the Bible had not been inspired by one Person.

III. The inspiration of the Bible is proved by the fulfillment of prophecy. Events are described, in detail, before their occurrence. Two sets of prophecies are especially noticeable in this respect. One set consists of the prophecies relat-

ing to the Jews. If any one will turn to the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy, read it and compare its prophecies with the subsequent history of the Jews, he can hardly doubt that he has read inspired words. Other prophecies, similar in their minuteness, relate to Christ. Examples are, Isaiah liii.; Micah v. 11; and Malachi iii. 1, 2. Many such might be given. Their details show them to be more than general expressions of hope that a Messiah would come. Who but God can know and describe events before they occur?

IV. The inspiration of the Bible is proved by its elevation of tone compared with that of contemporary writings by men who did not claim to be inspired. Take the New Testament books and compare them with the writings of the period immediately following the Apostolic. There is a great gap between the two. In elevation of thought, in moral tone, in spiritual insight, in terseness and vigor of expression, in definiteness and certainty of statement, the New Testament writings are infinitely superior to those of the next century. If the former had not been inspired, there should have been progress instead of such marked deterioration.

V. The divine origin of the Bible is proved by

the fact that it presents ideas different from those contained in any other book. Its representations of God could never have been conceived of by uninspired men. Its descriptions of man, of his depravity, of his need of re-creation, of his condemnation under a righteous law, are too unflattering to have been composed by men about themselves. This is not only true concerning man in general, but the sins and crimes of its heroes are displayed in all their deformity on the pages of the Bible. Other books try to make their heroes perfect. And the way of redemption is something which men would never have invented for themselves. The whole plan is unreasonable and repulsive to the sinful and unregenerate heart. If the Bible were a man-made book, its ideas would be more in conformity with those which we find men generally entertaining. No one can read the Bible without feeling that it contains more than the products of human thought.

VI. The inspiration of the Bible is proved by its effects on individuals and communities. Men and women are convicted of sin and led to exercise repentance and faith by reading its words. Other books may give their readers a moral im-

pulse ; the Bible completely changes them in heart and life. Those nations whose people have known and studied the Bible, are greatly superior to those whose character has been formed by the doctrines of uninspired men. To see the force of this, compare the morals and civilization of England or the United States with those of China or India.

Other proofs could be given, but these are enough to convince any one who is open to conviction that the Bible is the Word of God.

The inspiration of the Bible creates a difficulty in its interpretation. We naturally stand in awe of that which has come from the Lord. We think that what He has said must be so profound that no man can understand it. Of course, this is true in the sense that no man can comprehend all its meaning. But a revelation which cannot be understood is no revelation ; it is simply a mystery or puzzle. In His communication to us, it must be God's purpose that we should understand Him. When men write, they try to express themselves in such a way that their readers can apprehend their meaning. They want to be understood. Otherwise, why should they write at all ? The very purpose of a revelation is to con-

vey information—to dispel darkness and give light. To say that God has inspired a book which we cannot understand, is to charge Him with being such a poor author that He has defeated His own purpose. The Bible was certainly meant to be understood. If it is not the clearest of books, it is not God's book. Obscurity is not generally regarded as a good quality in an author. God is the best of authors, and therefore the clearest. He has done the most that divine skill can do to present His facts and ideas in such a way that we can grasp them. We attribute to the incomprehensibility of the divine what is due to our own ignorance of the things necessary to enable us to understand the Bible.

Can common people understand it? Of course, we need the help of scholars and of those who are habitual students of the Bible. Such help is of inestimable value. We need their help not because the thoughts of the Bible are obscurely expressed, but because it was written in languages and times unfamiliar to most of us. These obstacles to the understanding of it can be removed only by scholars. But when once we have the Bible in our own tongue, and the facts which give peculiar form to its expres-

sions are known, it is easy enough to understand it.

Of course, the ignorant and undisciplined will misinterpret some parts of it. They would do the same with any book to which they felt bound to give some meaning. They will misinterpret the simplest statements that ever fell from human lips or were ever stamped upon the printed page. Every teacher and preacher has had sad experience of this fact. That such persons make wretched work of interpreting the Bible is no reflection upon its simplicity and clearness.

It is not meant that the Bible can be understood without study. Its thoughts are too great to admit of easy comprehension. But that is no excuse for misunderstanding it. Neither does it justify the assertion that only a special class of men can rightly interpret it. The Bible is for the people. All should read and study it for themselves. While they should get all the help they can from scholars, they should accept no man's interpretation until it is verified by their own study. In that study they need the guidance of principles and rules of interpretation. This manual is intended to show how persons of ordinary gifts and intelligence can ascertain the

meaning of all its essential parts. It is hoped that it will be especially helpful to young Christians, who desire to know and appropriate the treasures of the inspired Word.



THE
INTERPRETER WITH HIS BIBLE.

CHAPTER I.

THE INTERPRETER HIMSELF.

MUCH bad interpreting of Scripture is due to the unfitness of the interpreter for the work which he has assumed. Moral character and mental attainments determine one's ability to understand the Bible as truly as they affect his success in any other line of effort. Because the Bible is easy to be understood, it does not follow that every one will get from it the right meaning. And yet, every intelligent person may do so if he will take the right course. The difficulties of interpretation are mostly subjective. They are more in the interpreter than in the book which is to be interpreted. They arise from both moral and intellectual unfitness. The former is more important than the latter,

since the Bible deals mainly with moral and religious subjects. We will consider—

I. THE MORAL ATTITUDE OF THE INTERPRETER.

If one would be a good interpreter, he must love the truth. He must have a strong desire to know exactly what God has said on the subjects discussed in the Bible. He must be interested in that class of topics. He must be a seeker after the truth. He must have the same intense desire to ascertain the facts of religion as God has revealed them, as the earnest scientist has to discover the facts and laws of nature. He must ask, not with the sneering skepticism of a Pilate, but with the earnest feeling of a true seeker, What is truth? He must love the truth more than he loves his own prejudices, or his own will and way. He must love the truth enough to obey it when it is discovered. He must not study the Bible to fortify himself in his prejudices or in disobedience. One having this spirit will be governed in his study of the Bible by three important rules of interpretation.

1. “*Let the Bible mean what it wants to*

mean."—We must not twist or distort it, in order that it may fit our preconceived theories. We must not come to it with opinions of our own and insist that it shall confirm them. We must not read into the Bible what is not there because we want it to say certain things.

This rule, so simple, so just, so axiomatic, is the one most frequently violated. It is doubtful whether an interpreter ever lived who always followed it; and the great majority violate it whenever it suits their convenience. Perfect observance of it may not be possible, but we must keep it constantly in mind, if we would understand God's message to us, and not make the pages of His book reflect our own ideas.

A few illustrations will show how this rule is violated. A man adopts the theory that there have never been and never will be any manifestations of the Supernatural in human life. His theory is expressed in the curt sentence of Matthew Arnold, "Miracles do not happen." To him every Bible story which relates a miraculous event is a myth. It is capable of some rationalistic explanation, and it is the business of the "higher criticism" to discover the truth or

fact which has been thus overlaid with the products of the “Oriental imagination.” He thus explains the accounts of the Crossing of the Red Sea (Gen. xiv.), of the Capture of Jericho (Joshua vi.), of Elijah on Carmel (1 Kings xviii.), of Jonah and the Whale (Jonah i.), of the Birth, Miracles, and Resurrection of Jesus, of the Conversion of Paul, and of every such event. Such a man will take nothing as it reads if it relates to the Supernatural. He will make sentences and words mean exactly the opposite of what they naturally mean rather than abandon his theory. He cannot interpret; he is trying to make a Bible of his own. A little common-sense would show him that he must choose between his theory and the Bible, and give up one or the other.

A man adopts the theory that all souls will be saved. When he comes to those passages (Matt. xxv. 41, 46; 2 Thes. i. 7; John v. 28, and many others) which declare that the wicked shall be punished with everlasting destruction, he does not take them as they read, but exerts his ingenuity to make them mean something else. Whether one believes in conditional immortal-

ity, or believes that all souls are necessarily immortal, he may hold his theory in such a way as to unfit him to interpret fairly those passages in which the words "die," "perish," and "are destroyed," as applied to the impenitent wicked, occur (Rom. vi. 23; James i. 15; Matt. xxv. 41, 46; 2 Thes. i. 9; 2 Peter ii. 12, and others). One may have such a theory of the New Birth and of Christian perseverance as to affect unfavorably his interpretation of such passages as Heb. vi. 4-8, x. 26-29, and John xv. 2, 6. The man who has formed a prejudice against the doctrine of election, will treat unfairly such passages as John xv. 16; Rom. viii. 29, ix. 10-15; Eph. i. 4-6; 1 Peter i. 2.*

We are especially likely to fall into this error when we are studying those passages which relate to the organization and ordinances of a Christian church. Our denominational prejudices are almost certain to warp our interpreta-

* It should not be inferred that the author is either advocating or opposing disputed doctrines because he refers to them by way of illustration. In some cases, to illustrate a rule or principle of interpretation, he shows that a certain doctrine cannot be found in the passage under consideration; but that leaves its advocates free to find it in other passages, if they can.

tions. We come to the Bible determined that it shall be on our side and confirm our doctrines and practices. We omit, inject, distort, twist, do everything except let the Bible mean what it wants to mean. Many examples of this could be given, but they must be omitted lest the author should be charged with denominational bias. They would be amusing if they were not such sad illustrations of our readiness to pervert the Scriptures for our own purposes.

No labored argument is needed to show the dishonesty and folly of this course. It is not exegesis, it is not interpretation, it is the sin of Balaam, who tried to make God speak what he wanted Him to, though all the time he knew God's will. It is shameful disloyalty to Him who has condescended to teach us. Some of it is due to human weakness; we cannot rid ourselves of our prejudices; more of it is due to human perversity. We cannot hope to understand the Bible until we are willing to let it mean what it wants to mean.

When one comes to the study of any part of Scripture, he should ask himself such questions as these: "Am I honestly seeking to find

out the real meaning of this passage? Am I willing to let God speak His mind, or am I trying to make Him speak my mind? Can I let this passage mean what it wants to mean? Am I willing to accept a meaning that will go against my prejudices and theories, if I have formed any?" On one's answer to these questions will depend his ability and trustworthiness as an interpreter. If he is loyal to his Lord and honest with himself, he will not pretend to interpret when he is trying to distort. If he would try always to have this attitude of mind, we might soon rise above even our unconscious prejudices, and be able really to interpret God's word and learn His will.

2. Study the Bible with an obedient spirit.

—This is not simply a rule of life; it is also a rule of interpretation. Jesus said: "If any man will do His will he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God." One must love the truth and hold himself subject to it, if he would learn the truth. Nothing blinds the understanding and warps the judgment like a perverse will. When men are determined to do wrong, they can usually persuade themselves that wrong is

right. It is doubtful whether there has ever been an error that has not had its honest advocates. When men will not obey the truth which is offered them, they are given over to believe a lie. A sort of moral blindness falls upon them and they lose any capacity they may have had to perceive the truth. Of course, this blindness exists in varying degrees, just as men obey the truth they know with greater or less faithfulness. But no man can rightly interpret the Bible unless he comes to it with an obedient spirit. A film will be formed over his eyes by any lurking purpose in his heart not to obey its precepts, if they should happen to cross purposes he has already formed.

This law is not arbitrary ; it is a law of the human mind. Christ's saying does not mean that the obedient man will have the truth miraculously revealed to him. He means that an obedient spirit is a necessary condition of knowing the truth. There is a sort of sympathy which one must have with the truth in order to know it. We must love the beautiful and have a cultivated taste in order to appreciate works of art. We must love a man if we would really

know the best that is in him. In some such way the organ of spiritual knowledge is an obedient spirit, which proceeds from love of the truth.

For example, suppose an unregenerate man begins the study of the Bible. He does not go far before he finds that he is commanded to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. He realizes that to obey will involve a complete change in his life. If he obeys he will find that God has other truth for him which He will make plain. If he disobeys, he cannot expect to interpret aright any portion of Scripture beyond this precept. Simple matters of fact—truth such as the intellect can apprehend—he may understand; but he will have no power to discern the spiritual. “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; neither can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. ii. 14).

This law applies with equal force to the Christian. If he will not do the truth, he shall not know the truth. Men have found in the Bible justification for war, polygamy, slavery, and other social evils because they wanted to practice them. Worldly amusements, the use of

intoxicants, alliance with men of the world, devotion to fashion, Sabbath-breaking, and kindred habits, lead to many false interpretations of Scripture. Those who do such things want the Bible on their side, and will misinterpret whatever condemns their habits. And the worst of such perversions is, that those who indulge in them come, after a time, to believe that they are true interpretations. They lose their capacity to know the truth.

One may see the same thing in ecclesiastical relations. Said a Christian lady of one of the denominations concerning the doctrines of another, "If they are right I don't want to know it." She voiced a common sentiment. "Let me remain in error, if knowing the truth will compel me to do disagreeable duties," say many. In that spirit they will put any construction upon Scripture rather than obey the truth. They thus lose all fitness to be interpreters.

We should not expect to discover the real meaning of God's book unless we have an obedient spirit. We should discard the interpretations of others just so far as we may justly suspect them of unwillingness to obey what they

learn from that book. “The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him,” not with them that defy or mock Him.

3. *Ask the aid of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Scriptures.*—Those who are honest and obedient seekers after the truth can consistently make this request. We need the Spirit to interpret that which He has inspired. What interpreter can equal the author of the book we are seeking to understand? The author would be the best interpreter in any case, but this is especially true with reference to those things which must be “spiritually discerned.” “He that is spiritual discerneth all things” (1 Cor. ii. 15). It was promised to the disciples that the Spirit should “guide them into all truth” (John xvi. 13). We need not suppose that this promise was limited to the Twelve. While Revelation is closed, the work of guiding disciples into the truth is still necessary. The Holy Spirit is promised to all. “If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him” (Luke ix. 13). And there are special promises which

seem to fit the need of the interpreter. "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth liberally to all men and upbraideth not" (James i. 5). If these promises are true, we cannot conceive that God would refuse the light of His Spirit to one who was faithfully seeking to know what He had revealed. In answer to prayer, we shall get the instructions of the Great Interpreter. While we may and must gain an understanding of many things by our own efforts, only by the aid of the Spirit can we apprehend the deeper meaning, the spiritual import, of the word. Let us, then, always begin our study of the Scriptures with a prayer for the aid of the Holy Spirit.

II. THE INTELLECTUAL PREPARATION OF THE INTERPRETER.

Of course, the more learning, talent, and discretion one has, the better interpreter he can be. The maximum of these qualifications should be sought by one who proposes to interpret and expound the Scriptures for others. But our present purpose is to define the minimum of intellectual preparation essential to one who would

understand the Scriptures for himself. Only such attainments as are within the reach of every person of average ability should be here discussed. We are not writing for scholars, but for the people.

In order to understand the Bible it is not necessary to know Hebrew and Greek, the languages in which it was originally written. Of course, an acquaintance with these languages is of great advantage to the interpreter; but it is not necessary. The translations which we now have are nearly perfect. One would have to give lifelong study to Hebrew and Greek, and devote himself assiduously to the work of translation, in order to equal them. While it is a satisfaction to read the Bible in the original tongues, not one in a hundred of those able to do it has any important advantage over one who cannot, in the matter of ascertaining its meaning. Do not lament your ignorance of Hebrew and Greek, if you have had no opportunity to learn them, but be assured that you can interpret the Bible fairly well without them.

One does not have to be learned in science, or art, or mechanics, or mathematics, or secular

history, or in any department of human knowledge, in order to interpret the Bible. Such knowledge may be a help; the mental training gained in its acquisition would be a greater help; but it is encouraging to every Bible student to know that it is not essential. One may be learned in the Scriptures without knowing very much of other things. That is the best kind of knowledge, since it can make us “wise unto salvation.” And yet, a certain amount of intellectual preparation is necessary for successful Bible study. Let us see what it is.

1. The Bible student should have education and mental training sufficient to enable him to apprehend the meaning of ordinary language. This seems like a very low requirement, but it is not so low as it seems. Language is a symbol of ideas, and many readers see the words without grasping the ideas of the most ordinary sentences. A fair test of whether one understands a sentence which he has just read would be to ask him to express the idea it contains in his own language. Of course, any reader could do that with simple statements of facts; but when it comes to abstract ideas, arguments, rules of

conduct and the like, it is quite a different thing.

It may be said that such a matter as this is quite beyond rules—that it is like saying one needs brains for the ordinary affairs of life. It is not quite the same. Brains cannot be supplied; but the power to apprehend the meaning of ordinary language can be cultivated. The rule is never to pass a sentence in reading without being sure you know what it means. There must be exceptions to this rule, for some men write sentences which mean nothing, and the meaning of others is very obscurely expressed; but if one were to follow that rule in his ordinary reading, it would greatly increase his power to interpret language.

2. The ability to use Bible references, Bible dictionaries, an atlas of Bible lands, a concordance, and other similar helps to Bible study. Young people should be taught the meaning of the letters and figures on the margins of their Bibles, and shown how to use them. Some of these references are of very little value, being merely to verbal resemblances; but others are valuable. To supply their deficiencies, we

should learn to make references of our own. Every person should have a Bible of his own with wide margins on the pages, and be free to mark references at any time for use in future study. Bible students should also learn the use of the Concordance. This will be useful both in finding passages of which we can remember only a leading word, and in enabling us to collate passages containing the same word. This may be the name of the subject of which the passages treat, and so the Concordance will be of great help to one in the topical study of the Bible. Every student of the Bible should have a Bible dictionary, and acquire the habit of using it. It is a good plan in all our systematic study of the Bible, to look up in such a dictionary the name of every person, place, event, mountain, river, and other object which we may find in the passage under consideration, and learn all we can about it. To find the places named upon a map is a great help, since we are thus enabled to see their relations to other places. It is very easy to acquire the ability to do these things ; to acquire the habit is not so easy.

3. An important part of the interpreter's intellectual preparation is knowledge of the geography and history of Bible lands, and of the manners and customs of the people in Bible times. He will have constant use for this kind of knowledge, for there are few passages of Scripture which can be understood without it. While the truth of the Bible was revealed by inspiration, the form in which that truth was expressed was much affected by the circumstances in which its different books were written. We get at the truth through the form, and need, therefore, the fullest possible knowledge of the circumstances which affected its form of expression. It will be worth while to consider a few illustrations of this fact. As might be expected, we shall find most frequent references of this kind to the manners and customs of the people in Bible lands and times. One cannot understand the parables of the Ten Virgins (Matt. xxv. 1-13), and of the Marriage of the King's Son (Matt. xxii. 1-14), nor the account of the wedding in Cana (John ii. 11), unless he is acquainted with the marriage customs of the Jews in the time of Christ. When we read that

Jesus said, for the purpose of illustrating certain truths, that men do not put new wine into old bottles lest the bottles should burst (Matt. ix. 17; Mk. ii. 22; Luke v. 37, 38), we have no idea of what He means so long as we think of glass bottles; but when we know that they used leathern bottles, His meaning becomes clear. When we read that a paralytic whom Jesus healed arose, took up his bed and walked away with it (John v. 11, 12), a ludicrous and impossible image rises in our minds till we learn that the ordinary bed consisted simply of a thin mattress spread upon the ground or floor. In the Bible we read of grass growing upon the house-tops (Ps. cxxix. 6, 7), of people coming down from the house-tops as from their ordinary places of resort (Matt. xxiv. 17), and of things being proclaimed from the house-tops (Luke xii. 3). All this is unintelligible to us till we remember that the houses in Palestine were built with flat tops, and that people spent much of their time upon the roofs, and even made gardens on some of the larger houses. We read that the feet of guests were washed as they "sat at meat" (Luke vii. 38; John xiii.

5), and wonder what was the occasion of it, and how it could be done. Knowledge of two facts makes it clear : one is that they wore not shoes and stockings, but sandals, which protected their feet from injury, but not from dust and dirt, making frequent washings necessary ; and the other, that they did not sit at the table, but reclined on couches with their feet projecting over the couches away from the table. John the Baptist describes Jesus as one “ whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor ” (Matt. iii. 12). If we think of a “ fan ” as an article with which to cool the face, we cannot see how a threshing-floor can be purged with it ; and we must learn that it was a large instrument used for winnowing grain, before we can form a correct mental picture of the figure. The many beautiful references to the shepherd’s work to show what the Lord does for His people (Ps. xxiii.; John x. 1-16 ; Heb. xiii. 20, and others), have little force till we know how the Oriental shepherds cared for their flocks. To interpret the figures of ploughing, sowing, reaping, gleaning, and gathering into barns, we need to know how these things were done in the East

in Bible times. Isaiah makes our Lord say, “I have trodden the wine-press alone” (Is. lxiii. 3). The meaning of the figure is plain when we remember that to make wine, grapes were thrown into a great vat and their juice trodden out by men with bare feet and legs.

There are frequent references in the Scriptures to the natural peculiarities of Bible lands, and figures of speech are formed from them which it is not always easy for us to understand. For example, the frequent comparison of divine blessings to water, the references to streams, fountains, and wells, and the figures drawn from thirst and its satisfaction, are hardly intelligible to us till we know that the Hebrews lived in a land where water is scarce and where intense thirst is a common experience.

It is important for the interpreter to know something of the history not only of the Jewish nation, but also of the nations with which they came in contact. There is much of the Bible which we cannot understand without some knowledge of the Egyptians, Phœnicians, Syrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. Many passages both literal and figurative refer

to Baal, Astarte, Dagon, Moloch, and other gods of the heathens, and we cannot interpret them without knowing who and what these false gods were. The heathen custom of offering food to idols and afterward eating it throws light on many passages (Dan. i. 8; Rom. xiv. 15-20; 1 Cor. viii. 1-13), which speak of eating meat as though it might be a sin. We must know the relations of the Jewish nation to Rome, in the time of Christ, before we can interpret aright the passages (Matt. xxii. 15-22; Mark xii. 13-17; Luke xx. 20-26), in which the Pharisees and Herodians attempted to draw from our Lord utterances which might be construed as traitorous concerning allegiance to Cæsar. Many of our Lord's discourses were uttered in controversy with the Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees. How can we understand such discourses unless we know what these parties were and the doctrines they believed and taught?

These are a few illustrations of many which might be given showing the interpreter's need of acquaintance with the history, and manners and customs of the people mentioned in the Bible. Some passages it is impossible to under-

stand at all without such knowledge ; other passages lose half their force unless we know the circumstances which caused them to be uttered and gave them shape. Most of the knowledge thus needed can be obtained from a good Bible dictionary.

4. The interpreter needs common-sense as part of his intellectual equipment.

A caution may be needed in this connection. Many people reject certain interpretations and applications of Scripture on the ground that they are not sensible. By this it is meant that they do not conform to the common-sense judgments of mankind. But it should be remembered that the Bible is a Divine Revelation and that many of its statements directly contradict human opinions. What we think is true and right, and wise and good may not be so at all according to Divine standards. When we say that the interpreter needs common-sense, we do not mean that he must interpret the Bible so as to make it conform to human sentiments and opinions. We must take what is said, and not what we think ought to be said.

And yet, the interpreter does greatly need

common-sense. It will save him from many foolish and misleading interpretations. It may be asked, What is the use of saying this? If one has not common-sense, can he acquire it? He can, in some degree. Sound judgment, another name for the same thing, can certainly be cultivated. It is in part the result of observation and experience. And it is not meant that every one deficient in common-sense is to abstain from reading the Bible. The Bible is not for the few, but for the many. But some illustrations of what is meant by the use of common-sense in the interpretation of Scripture cannot but be helpful to one who desires to become a good interpreter.

When Jesus was at the house of Martha and Mary in Bethany, He said to the former, who was "cumbered about much serving": "One thing is needful" (Luke x. 38-42). This has been interpreted as meaning one dish, but common-sense would reject such an interpretation as beneath the dignity of the occasion and out of harmony with the rest of the verse. On the shore of Galilee, after the resurrection, Jesus said to Peter: "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me

more than these?" (John xxi. 15). This has been interpreted to mean "more than these" fish, but common-sense would reject that interpretation as trivial. Jesus said to the thief on the cross: "Verily I say unto thee, this day shalt thou be with me in Paradise." This is simple and plain enough, but men with a theory to support violate the first principles of common-sense and adopt the silly interpretation, "Verily I say unto thee this day, thou shalt be with me in Paradise," an interpretation for which there is no warrant whatever. Jesus said, "Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away" (Matt. v. 42). Common-sense forbids us to interpret this with absolute literalness, for if we were to do so and obey the precept, we should violate that very law of love which it is meant to illustrate and injure those who seek to live by abusing the good nature and charity of others. When James says, "The prayer of faith shall save the sick" (James v. 15), common-sense should keep us from making it mean that we are to use no other remedy for sickness.

But the need of common-sense is not limited to the interpretation of particular passages. Without it no part of the interpreter's work can be well done, as we shall see in the discussion which is to follow.

CHAPTER II.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION.

SUPPOSE one to be well prepared for the work of interpreting, he still needs rules for his guidance. The rules which we shall give in this manual are such as are generally accepted by interpreters. They have not been formed in the interests of any party or denomination of Christians. They are not intended to aid in the establishment of any particular set of doctrines. Their sole purpose is to aid students of the Bible in discovering its true meaning. If to follow them overthrows any one's theories of revealed truth, it will be conclusive evidence that his theories need to be revised. We make this claim because the justice and propriety of the rules are self-evident. If any one rejects them, it will be good evidence that he wants to establish a theory rather than discover the real meaning of Scripture. Many a man would like to

have Lesbian rules of interpretation—rules which he can bend to his wishes and so apply as to make the Scriptures yield the meaning he desires. But these rules are not of that kind. They are meant to be just and impartial. If they are so, any man should be willing to land where they will bring him.

We have tried to make these rules so simple and plain that their application will be easy. Rules of interpretation that are more difficult to understand than the work to be interpreted would not be of much use.

These rules should be thoroughly mastered, so that we can unconsciously apply them in our study of the Bible. Like the rules of good manners in society, or like the rules of elocution, in order that they may be of the greatest use, we must know them so well that we can both forget and follow them. An occasional reference to rules may be necessary in deciding between two possible meanings of a passage ; but constant dependence upon them would hamper the interpreter. He should, therefore, be as familiar as possible with the general principles of interpretation.

We shall find it convenient to group these rules in two great divisions.

I. INTERPRET THE BIBLE AS YOU WOULD ANY OTHER BOOK.

This rule is sometimes modified by the phrase, “so far as it is like any other book.” But the rule itself suggests the principle that we are to adapt our method of interpretation to the nature of the book. The Bible is divinely inspired. In that it is unique—set apart from all other books. It is to be approached with reverence and the spirit of obedience. We are not required to approach any other book with such feelings and purposes. We must accept its statements without question or cavil, simply seeking to know what they mean. The statements of other books we may criticise, question, reject, if we find good reason. In other books men like ourselves are speaking, and we are not required to be simple learners. When God speaks we have only to listen and obey.

But these differences do not affect the general principles of interpretation. It is true that God speaks in the Bible; but, as already stated, we

may presume that He intends to be understood. His purpose was to convey facts and ideas in intelligible language. This simple fact is not always apprehended. Many seem to have an idea that a divine book is necessarily mysterious and obscure. They treat the Bible as though it were a sort of hieroglyph, which can be made out only by those who have the magical key. They forget that it was given through men for men, and was meant to be understood. In addressing men He must use their language, and this language has certain well-known and accepted principles of interpretation.

Misconception on this point has been the cause of a great deal of bad interpreting. Hence we need to emphasize the general principle that the Bible is to be interpreted like any other book. This being granted, we may suggest a few specific rules of interpretation which we must follow in the study of any work.

1. *Consider the circumstances of the writer.*

—There is a human element in the Scriptures which affects not only their forms of expression, but also, to some extent, their substance. The writers were not mere machines, without thought

or feeling of their own, but they were living men. God did not make them mere amanuenses who wrote at His dictation, but respected their personality and let it have its force in modifying what they wrote. In the Bible the mark of every man's character is deeply impressed upon his composition. By making this use of the personality of His agents, the Holy Spirit found better media for the conveyance of truth in its many aspects; and gave profitable variety to the books of the Bible. We should be thankful for the humanity as well as for the Divinity of the inspired writings.

The interpreter will be aided in his efforts to understand many books, if he studies the character of the author and keeps in mind its prominent traits. Moses was a man of broad conceptions, of intense energy, of wonderful patience, and of high moral tone. His character and habits of thought were greatly affected by his Egyptian training, by his experience in Midian, and by the sense of responsibility which he felt as the leader of Israel. We find this character impressed upon the Pentateuch, most of which he wrote. David was the poet of Israel, a

man of strong passions, of affectionate nature, and of deep piety. His experience as the shepherd of Jesse's flocks, as the outlaw fleeing from the wrath of Saul, and as the sinning and penitent king of Israel, are expressed in his Psalms. Without knowing the man and his history we cannot understand his writings. The most prominent trait of Paul's character was moral earnestness. When a Jew, he was one with all his heart ; when he became a Christian, he went into the work of Christ with a flaming zeal that nothing could quench. This intense earnestness is apparent in all he wrote, and we cannot appreciate his discourses and epistles unless we remember what sort of man he was. That Luke was a physician explains many turns of thought and expression in the Gospel which bears his name, and in the Acts of the Apostles.

We cannot know the character and habits of every inspired writer ; but so far as possible the interpreter should study them. And we should remember that all these men were Orientals, and had Oriental habits of thought and expression. Men of the East are usually less practical, less

direct, less exact, more imaginative, more emotional, and less restrained than men of the West. We should also keep it in mind that the writers of the Bible were Jews, trained under the laws and according to the methods of that peculiar people. Even the New Testament writers were subject to this influence, though the ultimate effect of Christianity was to deliver the followers of Christ from Judaism.

To know the situation of each writer at the time of his writing is sometimes a help in understanding his works. For example, the epistles of Paul which he wrote from his Roman prison bear evidence of the fact and must be interpreted in the light of it. A careful study of the Acts is a great help in understanding all the epistles of this great author. As these writers were human, and as their circumstances would affect both their way of looking at truth and their forms of expression, the more the interpreter knows of them, the better for his work.

2. *Consider the design or purpose of the writer.*—The interpreter should not only be acquainted with the character and circumstances of the writer whose book he is studying, but he

should try to ascertain his design or purpose in writing. For whom was the book written? What was there in their character or circumstances which called for it? What purpose did the writer aim to accomplish by his book or epistle? With what motives did he undertake its composition? It may not be possible to answer all these questions about every book of the Bible, but we should know as much as we can about the author's design. It is impossible fully to understand any writer without taking this into account.

A proper consideration of the design will affect the interpretation of some books much more than that of others. The purpose of some books is so general that it does not affect the details of the interpretation. The historical books of the Bible were written to show God's dealings with men, and how they act in certain relations with Him. In general it is the history of redemption; but every historical book has its own particular purpose. Genesis tells of the Creation, of the Fall of man, and the Call of Abraham as the beginning of redemption. Exodus relates how the Chosen People were deliv-

ered from Egyptian bondage, and instructed and trained for God's service. The purpose of the four Gospels is to set before us the Person, Character, Words, and Works of the Son of God, our Saviour. The Acts was written to show us how men act when they believe in Jesus and are filled with the Holy Spirit. It will help us to interpret these and other historical books if we keep in mind their purpose.

The Psalms were written for devotional purposes and were intended to voice the religious feelings of the Hebrew People. The heart immediately interprets those which it can appropriate and use. In many cases their time and circumstances must be considered before they can be understood. This is especially true of the Imprecatory Psalms, those in which vengeance is sought upon the enemies of the author or of his people. In studying these Psalms it should be remembered that the Hebrews were taught to believe that their enemies were the enemies of God, and that under the law vengeance upon one's enemies was understood to be permitted.

The Prophecies were written to warn, to re-

buke, or to encourage the people of God. It is impossible to get much meaning from them without considering their design and the circumstances which called them forth. Take, for example, the Prophecy of Jeremiah, who was so intensely human, and yet, who spoke with the mighty power of God. He lived in the degenerate days of Judah when, under such kings as Manasseh and Amon, the nation was rapidly falling into idolatry and profligacy. He was bitterly persecuted on account of his faithfulness in warning the people that national disaster and ruin would inevitably follow national sins. Keep these important facts in mind and you will not only be able to understand him, but you will also sympathize with his spirit and feel that he could not have spoken otherwise. Again, take Revelation, at the same time the grandest Prophecy of the Bible and the most difficult to understand. With what purpose was it written? Once learn this and the general import of the book becomes clear. John was an exile for Christ's sake on the Island of Patmos. The feeble young Church which had started at Jerusalem with such buoyant hope was suffering ter-

rible persecution. Rome, with an emperor who seemed a fit incarnation of heathen cruelty and ferocity, had decreed its extinction. To human eyes it looked as though the powers of evil were to have everything their own way. In this emergency the Lord sends a message to His churches. What could it be but a message of encouragement? Through John, and with the use of types and symbols, He assures His trembling followers that His cause,—the cause of truth—will surely conquer. This is the purpose of Revelation. It is the book of Christ's Triumph. Keep that purpose in mind, and, while some of the details of the book will remain obscure, its general import will be clear.

These are examples of the use of considering the author's design for the sake of a general understanding of his writings.

In many cases the design of the whole book must be taken account of in interpreting particular passages. To do this is often the best way to settle the meaning of passages which would otherwise be very difficult. Paul says, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Rom. iii. 28).

Does he mean that one who believes in Christ will be saved even though he lives a wicked life? Men have put that interpretation upon his words. But if they had considered the design of the whole book they could not have done so. The purpose of that book is to show that men are all sinners under a condemnation which they cannot escape by their own efforts, and that the only way of justification is by faith in Christ; but he abundantly explains that the faith which secures justification is a faith which leads to holy living—to a righteousness higher and purer than was possible under the law. To correct the prevalent error that men must be saved by works, he has emphasized the opposite view. On the other hand, James says, "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified and not by faith only" (James ii. 24). But consider his purpose and you will see that he does not contradict Paul. He is writing against an abuse of the doctrine of justification by faith, and shows that a dead faith, a faith which produces no good works, will not justify. In the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul seems to discountenance marriage (vii. 1, 8, 26), and to

forbid women to speak in the meetings of the church (xiv. 34, 35). These passages have occasioned much difficulty; but great light is shed on them by considering the purpose of the whole epistle. Paul had learned that licentiousness was creeping into the church at Corinth, that there was disorder in their assemblies, that they were having trouble on account of the marriage of Christians with heathen, and of the existence of various other evils and disorders among the members. To correct these evils, to quiet these disturbances, to counsel them in their perplexities, he writes this epistle. In such relations as they then held it might be better for them not to marry. With such danger of disorder in their meetings, it would be better for the women to keep silent.

Take another illustration from the First Epistle of John. He says (v. 18), "We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not." This puzzles us, because we know that the children of God do sin. But consider the purpose of the whole letter. He says (ii. 1), "These things write I unto you that ye sin not." Then he goes on to show that all men sin, that for-

giveness of sins may be obtained through the intercession of Christ, but that the only cure for sin in the soul is the New Birth and the development of the New Man who cannot sin because born of the Holy One.

These are illustrations of the help which the interpreter gains by considering the design of the whole book of which he is studying a part.

How is the scope or design of a book to be ascertained? Sometimes it is directly or inferentially stated by the writer himself, as in John xx. 31; Rom. iii. 28; James ii. 24; 1 John ii. 1. In other cases it is to be gathered from various incidental remarks of the author, as in the letters to the Corinthians, to the Galatians, and to the Colossians. Sometimes it may be learned from the historical circumstances. But the best method of learning it is to read through the whole book carefully several times, trying each time to grasp the writer's general thought and purpose. This is the only fair way to treat any writing. To read a little here and there, without considering the relation of the part read to the whole, or to other parts, is certainly not the way to understand any of it.

If you were to get an important letter from a wise and good man, and to-day should read a little near the end, and to-morrow should read a fragment in the middle, and next week should read a few lines near the beginning, you would not have a very clear idea of the meaning and purpose of his letter. But is not that the way most of us read the books of the Bible? We may read in that way with profit after we have gained a good apprehension of the whole; and some short passages are profitable taken wholly by themselves; but there are not many portions of Scripture which are not made more valuable by considering them in connection with the whole book to which they belong; and most passages can be fully understood only in that way. Therefore, consider the author's design in writing the book.

3. *Get the meaning of the terms used.*—“Give attention to definitions,” said Samuel Johnson, and he never uttered a precept containing more practical wisdom. It is as necessary to the intelligent study of an author as it is to clear thinking. It is a good rule never to pass a word in one's reading without being sure of its mean-

ing. We may not be able to give a scientific definition of every word we read, but we should at least be able to express its meaning in some word perfectly familiar to us. This rule is a primary one in all interpretation, but it has a few special applications in the interpretation of the Bible.

The interpreter should know the meaning of every proper name which he meets in his Bible study. The name of every person, tribe, nation, country, city, mountain, river, idol, false god, battle, and the like, should be to him more than an arbitrary and empty symbol; it should bring to his mind a definite image or fact. To be thus acquainted with its proper names would add greatly to the rich treasures of the Bible. The Bible dictionary will give the necessary information.

Many words in the English version of 1611 have changed their meaning or become obsolete. Familiar examples are the words "thought" (Matt. vi. 25, 34), "prevent" (1 Thes. iv. 15), "conversation" (2 Cor. i. 12; Phil. i. 27; Heb. iii. 5), and "charity" (1 Cor. xiii.), where "thought" means anxious care, "prevent," go

before, “conversation,” way of life, and “charity,” love. In all such cases the Canterbury revision, commonly called the New Version, will give one the right word.

In ascertaining the meaning of terms it is, of course, a great help to know the original Hebrew and Greek. But I am writing for those who must content themselves with translations. If the meaning of a word is not perfectly known and the connection does not make it clear, reference should be had to an English dictionary. If a word is used in more than one sense in different places in the Bible, the connection must determine what meaning it has in every case. A few illustrations will show the force of this suggestion. In Luke xiv. 26, our Lord said, “If any man come to me and *hate* not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” In 1 John ii. 11, John says, “He that *hateth* his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness.” It is evident that the word “hate” does not mean the same thing in both cases. In the former it means “love less than me”; in the latter, to “dislike intensely,

with a desire to injure"; and the context and parallel passages show the difference. In John iii. 16 we read, "God so loved the *world* that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him might not perish." In 1 John ii. 15, John says, "Love not the *world*." Are we forbidden to love what God loves? In one case "world" means the souls that are in the world; in the other it means wealth, honor, carnal pleasure. Jesus said to Zacheus, "This day is *salvation* come to this house" (Luke xix. 9). In Rom. xiii. 11, Paul says, "Now is our *salvation* nearer than when we believed." Jesus meant salvation from divine condemnation. Paul meant salvation from all sin and from all the evils incident to our earthly life. The word "save" is used indiscriminately in these two senses. In Scripture the word "death" is used to describe both the departure of the soul from the body and the eternal destruction of the lost soul.

In the examples already given, the same Greek word is used in both cases. Occasionally we have the same English word for two different words in the Greek. In Heb. xii. 28, we are

told to serve God with *reverence*. In Eph. v. 33, wives are exhorted to *reverence* their husbands. The two Greek words express exactly the shade of difference between the awe and adoration which we are to feel before God, and the honor which a wife should give her husband. By carefully considering the context and the nature of the subject under discussion, the Bible student will be able to discern these differences. And in every case he should know the meaning of the words he reads by giving attention to definitions.

4. *Interpret according to the nature of the subject.*—The interpreter should guard the application of this rule by remembering that he is not trying to establish his opinion of what ought to have been taught, but to find what really was taught. It is easy for us to subvert the teaching of Scripture by saying that our Lord, or an inspired writer, must have meant so and so, because anything else would have been inconsistent with His nature or the “nature of things.” It is by this fallacious process that men think they prove universal salvation, future probation, and other false doctrines. But when we get our

knowledge of the subject from the Scriptures, it is proper to interpret any particular word or passage according to the nature of the subject under discussion. A good illustration of this rule is seen in the passage just quoted from Luke xix. 26. We are taught by Scripture and by natural instinct to love our kindred. From the nature of the subject, therefore, we know that Jesus did not mean that we are to hate them in the ordinary sense of the word "hate"; but that if they should come between Him and us we must repudiate them rather than forsake Him. In Psalm vii. 11, we read, "God is *angry* with the wicked every day." Similar expressions concerning the anger of God are found in Ex. xxxii. 10; Deut. ix. 19, 20; Psalm civi. 32, and in other places. Now the word "anger" ordinarily describes an evil passion, violent rage, which, unless restrained, would lead to evil deeds. But from what the Scriptures tell us of God, we know that His anger cannot be that, but is holy indignation against all iniquity. He has the same feeling against evil at all times; but for wise reasons He may withhold punishment in one case and inflict it in

another. In Gen. vi. 16, we read, “And it *repented* the Lord that He had made man on the earth, and it *grieved* Him to the heart.” God knows all things from the beginning to the end and does not change; He has no mistakes over which to mourn; and we must interpret this passage according to these facts. It means that God saw that men in their wickedness were bringing measureless evil out of that which He intended for good. It is said that the “Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” We know that God could not be the direct and active agent of a wicked thing, for “God cannot be tempted of evil, neither tempteth He any man” (James i. 13). Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, under a law which God has established, by his own repeated refusals to do right. Other passages, such as 1 Kings xxii. 21–23; Is. vi. 10; Is. lxiii. 17, are to be interpreted in accordance with this principle. These are perhaps sufficient illustrations of the importance of interpreting according to the nature of the subject.

5. *Take the most simple and natural meaning of the passage as likely to be the true one.* —This is a very important rule. It forbids the

practice of allegorizing—a practice very common with interpreters in the early days of Christianity. It was their custom to treat Old Testament history not only as real history, but also as having a second meaning. According to their view, every person and event, every relation and transaction, was intended to foreshadow and illustrate something which it resembled in the Kingdom of Christ. This led to many fanciful interpretations which had no basis in reality. Many things in the Kingdom of Christ may be illustrated by Old Testament history, but we are not to conclude that the events of that history were intended to prefigure these things unless there is some intimation to that effect in the Scripture itself. The Old Testament contains many types which are thus plainly indicated. The Jewish priests typified Christ as our Great High-Priest. David was a type of Christ in His kingly office. The prophets were types of Christ as a Teacher. The slain lamb, in the Mosaic ritual, typified Christ as a sacrifice, "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." The act of prayer was typified by the incense of the ritual. Leprosy

was a type of sin. The brazen serpent set up on a pole to heal the serpent-bitten Israelites, was a type of Christ on the Cross. The forty years of wanderings in the wilderness typify the journey of the Christian through this world on his way to heaven. These are examples of what is meant by types. While the Old Testament is thus a rich mine of illustrative truth, we are not to suppose that all of it has a double meaning. Much of it is plain history, written to show how God deals with men in pursuing His purposes of redemption. It is just as true in the interpretation of the New Testament that we should not seek for second or far-fetched meanings. The simple, natural meaning is much more likely to be the correct one.

On the other hand, we should avoid extreme literalism. We must carefully distinguish between literal and figurative language. This subject is so important and extensive that we shall have to consider it in a separate chapter. But it is in place here to utter a warning against the literalism in interpretation which is at the root of so much false doctrine and so many foolish practices. It requires skill, common-sense, and

care to keep the path between allegorizing and literalism ; but a careful observance of the rules of interpretation will enable us to do it. A few examples of literalism will help to avoid it. Christ said, “ If thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast it from thee; . . . if thy right hand causeth thee to stumble, cut it off and cast it from thee ” (Matt. v. 29, 30). There have been those who have interpreted these literally, and maimed themselves in obedience to its supposed meaning. Jesus said, “ Resist not evil ” (Matt. v. 39). A modern writer, interpreting this literally, says that it forbids society to punish criminals through its magistrates by due process of law. Jesus said, “ Swear not at all ” (Matt. v. 34). The Friends, interpreting this literally, make it prohibit the use of any form of oath in courts of law. Because we are commanded to observe the seventh day as the Sabbath, the literalists tell us that we must keep it on Saturday, because that is the seventh day as the Jews counted time. Out of a book which is nearly all symbolical, and in which symbolical numbers are constantly used, the literalists take a passage (Rev. xx.) which predicts

that Satan shall be chained and Christ shall reign a thousand years, and make it mean that in visible person He shall reign on the earth for that exact period.*

With the caution against too great literalism kept in view, we may safely follow the rule to give the language of Scripture its simple, natural meaning. The meaning which first occurs to the intelligent and unbiased reader is usually the correct one. It may not be exhaustive, but it is likely to be correct so far as it goes. It seems hardly necessary to illustrate this, but a few examples may be given. Jesus said to Nicodemus (John iii. 5), "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." There have been many ingenious and labored efforts to prove that "water" here means "the Word," but these spring from a desire to combat the false doctrine of baptismal regeneration. The plain and obvious reference is to baptism as a symbol of regeneration. Jesus said (Matt. xvi. 18), "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock will I build my Church." The natural meaning is that upon Peter the believing,

* See note on *Disputed Doctrines*, page 19.

confessing, living stone, Christ would lay the foundation of His Church. Other interpretations have probably been inspired by fear of countenancing a Romish error.

II. INTERPRET SCRIPTURE BY SCRIPTURE.

“The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible.” This familiar rule has several forms of application. Every one of them constitutes an important rule in itself. It will be impossible to give them here the full discussion which their importance demands, but enough can be said to enable the interpreter to use them to good advantage.

1. *Interpret every passage with reference to the general drift of the whole Bible.*—If God was the author of the Bible, all its parts must be homogeneous. Every passage must fit into the whole, as the prepared stones of Solomon’s Temple fitted into the completed structure. It follows that it is not well to treat any passage by itself, as though it were a complete utterance. It is not fair to judge the teaching of any author by scraps or isolated passages from his writings. By such a process we could convict any one of

inconsistencies. And we should be very careful to observe this rule in interpreting the Bible because it contains such various forms of expression. It has many ways of saying the same thing. This results in part from the fact that it has a great number of writers, and in part from the fulness of the Divine mind. This rule, that we must consider the drift or meaning of the whole Bible in interpreting any particular passage, is based on the assumption that all its parts are consistent with one another. It also assumes that the Bible has one central subject on which every part has some sort of bearing.

The one grand theme of the Bible is *Redemption*. It begins with the creation and fall of man ; shows the results of sin in human character and life ; proves by history that his course is ever downward ; tells how God has intervened to save him ; traces the course of redemption from the promise that “the seed of woman” should “bruise the head of the serpent” till Christ, on the cross, said, “It is finished”; declares unmistakably that man is “dead in trespasses and sins,” and must be “born of the

Spirit" to be "alive unto God"; makes faith the condition of pardon and justification; and teaches that the "new man" is to be perfected in holiness by the word of truth and the sanctifying Spirit. From beginning to end it is a book of redemption—a book whose purpose is to make us "wise unto salvation." The key for its interpretation is to be found in the facts that man needs saving, that God alone can save him, and that God has made provision for his salvation in Christ, the crucified and risen Lord. All parts of the Scripture harmonize with its purpose to set forth redemption. All are to be interpreted in the light shed by this supreme fact. If any passage seems out of harmony with these great doctrines of sin and redemption, it must be because we have not discovered its real meaning. It is very wonderful how all parts of the Bible can be made to harmonize with one another around that central theme.

The observance of this rule has been called interpreting by "the analogy of faith." The general teaching of Scripture on any subject is easily ascertained. For example, let any one read the New Testament through and he would

have no doubt that its writers meant to teach the Divinity of Christ. They declare Him to be the Son of God, and very God manifested in human form. Neither could the reader doubt that they meant to teach the Personality and Divinity of the Holy Spirit. And when he finds a single passage which declares the unity of the Godhead, such as, "The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. vi. 4), or, "To us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things" (1 Cor. viii. 6), we must interpret them in the light of the general teaching. There are three persons in the one God. It would be equally plain to such a reader that the one way of salvation is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is asserted so often and so emphatically that it is impossible to be mistaken about it. And yet we read, "Work out your own salvation" (Phil. ii. 12); "he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven shall enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. vii. 21); God "will render to every man according to his deeds" (Rom. ii. 6), and many similar passages. These must be so interpreted as to harmonize with the main teaching on the subject. It is equally plain that the New Testa-

ment teaches that those who die impenitent will be eternally lost. No mistake on this point is possible to the honest reader. Yet it is said that God "will have all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. ii. 4); and that "He is able even to subdue all things to Himself" (Phil. iii. 21). Making an attempt to interpret these "according to the analogy of faith," we find that "will" means "would" or "desires to" and that the Greek word should have been so translated. We find also that "subdue" need not mean "to make obedient," but ordinarily means "control," as criminals are controlled when they are imprisoned. These are illustrations of what is meant by interpreting "according to the analogy of faith." We should make every passage harmonize with the general teaching of the Bible. This we can always accomplish without doing violence to the real meaning of the passage. In this way we shall be able to find its true interpretation.

2. *Consider the context.*—This is substantially the same rule as the preceding applied to some particular part of the Bible rather than to the whole of it. The context may be defined as the

portion of Scripture in immediate connection with the text. It will vary greatly in extent. In some cases there will be no context at all, as in some parts of the book of Proverbs, where every sentence expresses a complete thought and may stand by itself without loss. In other cases, the context will properly include only a few sentences, or a single paragraph. This will be enough to enable one to discover the real meaning and bearing of the text. In a few cases, a text cannot very well be understood without taking into account the whole book of which it forms a part. This is the case with passages from such books as Romans and Hebrews. It is not easy to interpret any part of either of these books without considering the character and purpose of the whole. In this sense, the context is the same as the author's scope, or design, a subject which has already been discussed. In the ordinary sense, the context means a limited portion in connection with the text.

In all connected discourse, study of the context is absolutely essential to correct interpretation. It is rarely safe to take any single verse.

of Scripture as though it presented a complete thought. And yet this is a very common practice. Would-be interpreters disregard the connection and give to passages entirely wrong meanings. This is a favorite method with those who wish to use Scripture to establish doctrines which they have already adopted. It is possible to prove almost anything from the Bible by this method. The man who proved the duty of suicide by quoting, Judas "went and hanged himself," "go thou and do likewise," was not more absurd than many others who are more serious. A man preached on universal salvation from the text, "Ye shall not surely die" (Gen. iii. 4), entirely overlooking the fact that it was Satan who said it. In the Bible you find the sentence, "There is no God" (Ps. xiv. 1). Look back a little and you see it prefaced by the words, "The fool hath said in his heart." These are very obvious and absurd violations of the rule to consider the context. In most cases it is done where the mistake is not so obvious, and the wrong interpretation which follows is all the more misleading. A few examples will make plain the importance of the rule and the method

of observing it. In Gal. v. 4 we read, "Ye are fallen from grace." This is often quoted as though it meant that they had backslidden and become neglectful of Christian duties. The connection will show that it has no reference to such a decline of personal piety. The whole sentence reads, "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." That is, they had lost the idea and hope of salvation by grace, and had fallen back to legalism—to dependence on good works. In Rom. viii. 8 we read, "So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God." Taken by itself this might mean that none of us can please God so long as we are in this world. But the connection makes it plain that "in the flesh" does not mean "in the body," but "under the control of the carnal mind." The words, "Touch not; taste not; handle not" (Col. ii. 21), are often made to do service as a text on temperance. One who studies the connection will see that Paul was not writing on that subject at all, but against Judaism and Jewish ordinances. Many obscure sayings of our Lord become plain when we study the context. He

said, "Many that are first shall be last; and the last first" (Matt. xix. 20; Mk. x. 31; Luke xiii. 30). The context shows His meaning to be that the first in privilege will often be last in reward because they have despised their opportunities. Several times he said, "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath" (Matt. xxv. 29; Luke viii. 18). This is hard to understand until the Parables of the Talents and of the Pounds, with which it is connected, make it plain that those who use their powers and opportunities to serve God will get more, while those who neglect them will lose what they have.

Careful study of the context will do at least four things: It will enable us to reconcile many apparent contradictions; it will make many obscure passages plain; it will give the right meaning in many cases where, without it, a wrong one would be adopted; and it will give richness and fulness of meaning to texts that by themselves seem unimportant. No rule of interpretation is more important than this. Decide

upon the meaning and application of no text until you have studied the context.

3. *Study the parallel passages.*—We may divide all parallelisms into verbal and real. The former are those in which the same word occurs. They are the parallelisms most frequently indicated in the reference Bibles. The main use of them is to enable us to understand the meaning of terms. When a term is of doubtful meaning in any passage, the study of other passages which contain it will generally aid us in our efforts to give it a *précise* and definite meaning. This has already been discussed in the paragraph on the meaning of terms.

Real parallelisms are those in which the same subject is treated. They may be *doctrinal* or *historical*. It must be remembered that the Bible was written by many different men in widely separated periods of time. It is all on the general subject of religion, and is characterized by remarkable unity. Almost every subject is treated by more than one writer, and some by many writers. It is of the utmost importance that we should compare their different views with one another if we would arrive at

the correct meaning of the whole. A single writer will often make several references to a subject, and it is but fair to him that we should consider all that he says on it before deciding what is his doctrine.

In one passage we may find that a doctrine is lightly touched upon or only alluded to, and we must look to the parallel passages for its full treatment. In some cases a passage that is obscure will be made clear by the study of its parallels. In other cases, passages which seem out of harmony with the general teaching of Scripture are fully explained in the same way.

A few illustrations will show the method and importance of comparing parallel passages. Jesus said (John x. 8), "All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them." Taken by itself, this might mean a universal condemnation of the Jewish prophets and teachers of the past; but in other places (John viii. 40, 56; v. 45-47; xii. 38-41), we find Him strongly commanding Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. In the former case He undoubtedly refers to pretended messiahs, or to all false and misleading teachers. An ob-

scure passage like (John vi. 53), "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you," is made plain by a reference to Matt. xxvi. 26, 28, where the institution of the Lord's Supper is narrated. We see at once that Jesus was speaking metaphorically and referring to a symbol of spiritual realities. One reading in First Corinthians, and coming upon the expression (v. 7), "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us," would hardly know what it meant until he referred to Exodus xii., and read the story of the Passover. Then the whole doctrine of the Atonement, which is here merely alluded to, would be plainly unfolded.

In the study of parallel passages, we shall come upon many apparent contradictions, and it is important to know just how to treat them. In most cases, as soon as we study the context and get at the real meaning of the two passages, they will be seen to be in harmony. In other cases, where the contradiction seems real in spite of such study, we must accept that passage as true which most nearly accords with the general teaching of Scripture and confess that we do not understand the other. Where one passage

seems to contradict several others, we must give it a meaning which will make it agree with the rest, if it will bear such a meaning. If it will not, we must wait for light upon it. It is not fair to found upon a single passage a doctrine which is controverted by many passages. A few examples may be given. John says in his First Epistle (iii. 9), "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: And he cannot sin because he is born of God." In the same Epistle (i. 8) he says, "If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." It is evident that the latter is in harmony with the general drift of Scripture, which plainly teaches that even true Christians are imperfect and sinful. What then does the former mean? It can only mean that the new, divine nature given to the Christian by the Spirit of God is without sin. Jesus said (John v. 40), "Ye will not come unto me, that ye might have life." He also said (John vi. 44), "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him." If one should attempt to excuse himself from the duty of accepting Christ by appealing

to the latter verse, the reply should be that the Father draws by His Spirit all to whom Christ is preached, but that some resist and reject Him. Jesus said (Matt. vii. 7), “Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” He also said (Luke xiii. 24), “Many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in and shall not be able.” The former refers to prayer; the latter refers to the effort which the unsaved will make to get into heaven. So understood the two verses do not contradict each other. In Gen. vi. 6, we read, “It repented the Lord that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart”; while in 1 Samuel xv. 29, we find, “The Lord is not a man that He should repent.” The latter is plainly in accord with the general teaching of Scripture that God is immutable. In the former, then, the word “repent” must be used in a figurative sense, and the whole expression is an example of the adaptation of language about God to human comprehension.

Another class of difficult passages are those called Historical Parallels. The same history is, in several cases, narrated by different writers, or repeated by the same writer. Examples are the

histories of the Hebrew people in Samuel, and Kings, and in Chronicles, the four Gospels, which are four separate biographies of our Lord, and the three accounts of Paul's conversion in Acts. The student of these parallel histories will find frequent apparent discrepancies and inconsistencies. Space need not be taken for examples, but three suggestions may be given which will enable Bible students to overcome most of these difficulties. First, consider that, while the Bible narratives are never incorrect, they are often very brief and incomplete. If we had fuller details in these histories, these apparent discrepancies would disappear. Secondly, consider that each writer looked at the events from his own point of view and recorded that by which he was most impressed. Third, that these parallel histories are given us in order that the record may be more complete, and we should combine them to get a full understanding of the events.

CHAPTER III.

THE INTERPRETATION OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE.

THE truths of the Bible are very largely expressed in figurative language. We should expect this from the nature of the topics discussed. Every student of language knows that most of the terms used to convey abstract ideas were originally metaphors. The reason was that such ideas could be clearly expressed to ordinary minds only by clothing them in terms relating to objects and events with which they were familiar through the senses. Some resemblance between the idea and the visible object would cause the name of the latter to be given to the former. So mental and emotional processes would be described in language naturally applied to events in the material world. Most of these terms have lost their metaphorical character and have come to be regarded as plain language.

If this necessity appears in metaphysics and
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logic, much more we should expect to find it in language intended to convey spiritual truths. These are of such a character that they can be made intelligible to man only by the use of the analogies between them and familiar objects. We should expect, then, to find the Bible just what it is, a book in which figures of speech are used with great frequency and profusion. For it contains a revelation of new truths—of truths entirely beyond the power of man to conceive without such a revelation, and which must be expressed in words whose meaning he can apprehend. Another reason may be given for the great amount of figurative language found in the Bible. People of strong and active imagination are prone to express themselves in figures of speech. The Orientals are an imaginative people and the Bible was written in their style of language.

While the figures of speech in the Bible originated in a real necessity, and add infinitely to its power as a medium of revelation, they increase somewhat the difficulty of interpreting it. It must not be supposed that rhetorical figures are used in the Bible merely for ornamentation.

They serve a distinct purpose in making ideas clear and forcible. At the same time they frequently add to the difficulty of ascertaining precisely what ideas the writer meant to express. This is especially the case where the figure is borrowed from objects and events with which we are no longer familiar. This matter has seemed to me of so much importance that I have decided to give a separate chapter to the interpretation of figurative language in the Bible.

The first step is to gain a clear conception of figurative as distinct from plain or literal language. A figure of speech is an expression in which a thing is said in the form of another thing related to it. This relation may be one of resemblance, or contrast, or position. Thus, when Jesus said, "I am the door," we perceive at once that He is using a figure of speech founded on comparison. When we read, "God so loved the world," we know that it does not mean the round globe, but the people on it. We see that it is a figure of speech founded on the relation of position,—that is, on contiguity. In each of these cases, one thing is spoken of in the form of another thing related

to it. That is the distinctive feature of all figurative language.

And yet it is not always easy to tell whether language is to be taken figuratively or literally. In some cases to arrive at a just decision on this question is one of the most difficult problems of interpretation. A few suggestions on this subject will be useful to the interpreter.

1. In most cases we can determine whether or not language is figurative by the nature of the subject. Exercising ordinary sense and judgment, is it possible or reasonable to give the passage a literal meaning? If it is not, then the passage must be figurative, and we should interpret it on that basis. For example, when Jesus says, "I am the door" (John x. 9), "I am the true vine" (John xv. 1), "I am that bread of life" (John vi. 48), and when He is spoken of as "the Lamb of God" (John i. 29), "a chief corner-stone" (1 Peter ii. 6), and as "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Rev. v. 5), we know that He is neither a door, a vine, bread, a lamb, a stone, or a lion; and that these expressions are figurative. It is impossible to read them literally. In like manner, we know that such

expressions as “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you” (John vi. 53), “This is my body,” and “This is my blood” (Matt. xxvi. 26, 28), are figurative, and that in taking them literally a simple and obvious rule of interpretation is violated.

2. Another method of determining whether language is to be taken literally or figuratively is to compare the two meanings with other Scriptural teaching. This comparison may extend only to the context, or it may include the general teaching of the whole Bible. With which meaning does the passage best fit into the general temple of divine truth?

A few illustrations will make plain the application of this rule. When Isaiah, addressing Israel, says (Is. i. 22), “Thy silver is become dross, thy wine mixed with water,” we know that he does not refer to material loss, for in the next verse and same sentence he speaks of the degradation of their princes and the corruption of their judges, showing plainly that he refers to them under the figures of silver and wine. In Amos viii. 9, we read this prophecy:

“And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord God, that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day.” We might take this as descriptive of physical phenomena, if the next verse did not tell us of calamities coming upon a rebellious people. This makes it clear that the prophet is using a figure to show the suddenness of the calamity. Jesus said (Matt. v. 39), “Whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” Taken literally, this would mean that when a Christian receives a blow he is to *invite* another. That this is not the meaning is plain from the first part of the command, which is, “Resist not evil.” We are not to strive, or contend, or strike back; rather than do that, we should be willing to take another blow, but we need not invite it. The command is a figurative way of saying that we are to be meek and gentle. John the Baptist said of Jesus, the coming Messiah (Matt. iii. 12), that He was one “whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor, and gather His wheat into the garner; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” This last clause,

and other passages like it, have been taken to mean that the impenitent wicked are to be punished in literal fire. But there is no more reason for giving such a meaning to this clause than there is for saying that the good are to be gathered into a literal granary. The whole passage is figurative and all its parts are to be interpreted alike.

In some cases, figurative language can be distinguished by taking into account the nature and teaching of the whole book in which it is found. In Rev. xx. 1-3, John says, "I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, and cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him." Many have supposed that this refers to a literal event which is to occur in the future. In the beginning of the next chapter John says, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea." Those who take this literally suppose that we have here a lesson in the

geography of the future. They infer from it that the earth is to be newly fitted up for the future habitation of the redeemed. The fact that the passages occur in a book of symbols should have saved every one from such an interpretation. Both passages are in keeping with the rest of the book, and are purely symbolical. The former represents the fact that by the spread of truth and by the effects of redeeming grace, Satan is to be deprived of his power in the earth. The latter is a vision intended to represent to the apostle the wonderful changes which the Gospel of the Son of God will produce. It will be as though the heavens and the earth had all been made new.

One may often determine whether an obscure or difficult passage is to be taken literally or figuratively by comparing the two meanings with the general teaching of Scripture. On the night of His betrayal, Jesus said (Luke xvii. 36), "He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one." Considering only the immediate connection, this seems like a command from our Lord that His followers should arm themselves for literal warfare. But if we consider the gen-

eral teaching of Christ; that He said (Matt. v. 39), "Resist not evil," "My kingdom is not of this world, else would my servants fight" (John xviii. 36), and "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matt. xxvi. 52); and that His apostles all understood Him to forbid them to engage in war, we perceive that this is a symbolical saying in which He counsels them to make use of any proper means of defense against their enemies. In Acts xxii. 16, Ananias is reported as saying to Paul, "Arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins." By itself this would mean that there is cleansing power in baptismal waters; but we know from the general teaching of Scripture that they have no such efficacy. Our souls can be cleansed only by the redeeming mercy and grace of God, manifested through Jesus Christ "whose blood cleanseth from all sin." The words of Ananias, then, are not to be taken literally, but as describing a symbolical rite. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians (iv. 14), "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him." From this and other similar passages it has been

inferred that the souls of the dead sleep till the resurrection. But from the general teaching of Scripture we learn that the word "sleep" is used in a figurative sense to describe death and that it applies only to the body. The figure is a common one among all peoples and it is absurd to consider it as a literal expression and to found an important doctrine upon such an interpretation of it.

In discussing the subject of discriminating between literal and figurative language, it is important to note that we should guard ourselves against the tendency to regard that as figurative which was intended to be plain history. Some interpreters would explain away the supernatural element in the Scriptures by saying that many of its stories are mythical. They are not real history, but are myths intended to teach important religious truths in the garb of fiction. There is one simple rule which we are to apply in every such case. Are these accounts given as plain history? If they are in prophecies, and are spoken of as visions; if they occur in high-wrought oratorical passages; or in poetry, where the imagination has full play; they may be fig-

urative. But if they are parts of plain narrative, with no intimation that they are myths or fables, it is a violation of the first principles of interpretation so to regard them. It is evident to every honest reader of the Bible that the stories of Eden, of Sinai, of Jonah, of the Birth of Christ, and of the Resurrection are given as plain history. They must be so read by all who regard the Bible as a trustworthy book.

When we have determined that a passage is figurative, there is one simple rule for its interpretation in every case: reduce it to plain language. It is not always easy to do this; in some cases it is impossible to express the exact idea without the use of figures of speech; but generally the rule will be found to work without difficulty. Let us now consider a few examples of its application to different kinds of figures.

One of the most common rhetorical figures of the Bible is the *metaphor*. It is usually easy to reduce this to plain language. When Jesus said (John x. 9), "I am the door," He meant, "I am the opening through which men pass from the world into the kingdom of God." When He said (John xv. 5), "I am the vine, ye are the

branches," He meant, "I am your source of life; I make you of the same nature as myself; I do my work in the world through you." Jesus sent a message to Herod in the words, "Go ye and tell that fox" (Luke xiii. 3). He meant, "Go and tell that cunning, crafty, and mischievous man." In the lxxxiv. Psalm it is said, "The Lord God is a sun and shield." This means that the Lord gives light, warmth, and protection to His people. Frequently several metaphors are combined in one sentence and used to express a single idea. The Lord said to Paul (Acts xxvi. 14), "It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." Reduced to plain language this means, "In persecuting my disciples and opposing me, you are only injuring yourself." Isaiah says (lv. 1), "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." Here there are at least three distinct metaphors. Spiritual desire is compared to thirst; power to satisfy one's desire is compared to money; and divine grace is compared to water, wine, and milk. Substitute these phrases

for the terms in the text, and you reduce the passage to plain language.

The *allegory* has been described as an extended metaphor. In this figure the details of the metaphor are given, and its different parts are each made to represent some event or transaction in the spiritual world. The pure allegory is always in the form of a narrative. There is a beautiful allegory in the Eightieth Psalm (vs. 8-16), in which Israel is compared to a vine. “Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: Thou hast cast out the heathen and planted it. Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root and it filled the land. The hills were covered with the shadow of it, and the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedars.” I need not quote the whole of it. Substantially the same allegory is used by Isaiah (v. 1-7). It is easy to reduce this to plain language by substituting “nation” for “vine”; “placed” for “planted”; “to be firmly established,” for “to take deep root”; and so on throughout the allegory. In Ezekiel xvii. we find an allegory in which Nebuchadnezzar is represented as an eagle; the royal family of Israel, by a cedar, of which

Jehoiachin is the highest branch; the Babylonian exile, by the transplanting of this branch; Pharaoh, by another great eagle; and the bad results of Israel's turning to Pharaoh, by the withering of the vine which had grown from the branch. The interpretation of this is given by the prophet in the remainder of the chapter. Our Lord's comparison of Himself to a shepherd (John x. 1-18) is really an allegory. Sometimes this figure is contained in a brief passage, as when our Lord says (Rev. iii. 20), "Behold I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with me." Reduced to plain language, this means: "I seek admission to the souls of men through their will; if any man recognizes me, and admits me to his soul, I will abide with him and he shall have fellowship with me."

The allegory closely resembles the *parable*. The chief difference is that in the allegory the spiritual objects and events are directly represented by the lower ones used in the figure, while in the parable they are illustrated by them. In the allegory the two sets are usually

identified; but in the parable they are compared with each other. In most cases this comparison is directly stated. Another difference is that in the allegory every object and event in the narrative represents something corresponding to it in the spiritual world; while the parable is intended to illustrate and enforce one great truth, and its correspondences vary greatly in the closeness with which they can be applied. The parable was used so constantly in the teaching of our Lord, that we shall be justified in giving it special attention. The Great Teacher has given us the interpretation of two parables,—that of the Sower (Matt. xiii. 3–8 and 18–23), and that of the Tares (Matt. xiii. 24–30 and 36–43). These may serve as models for all the rest. As a rule the best way is first to get at the central truth of the parable and then to trace the correspondences between the material transaction and the spiritual which it illustrates, though in some cases it is better to reverse this process.

Let us apply this method to the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke xv. 11–32). The central thought of this parable is the forgiving mercy of God. The immediate purpose of it was to

rebuke the Pharisaical spirit. Tracing the correspondences we find: 'The Father is God. The prodigal son is man fallen in sin. The far country is his moral alienation from God. The famine is the destitution of the sinner's soul. Feeding swine represents the low pursuits of the sinner. His return is the sinner's awakening and repentance. The father's coming out to meet him is God's willingness to receive the penitent. The robe, the ring, and the shoes are the favor and dignity bestowed upon the forgiven sinner. The festival is the rejoicing in heaven over the penitent. The older son is the self-righteous man. His anger is the feeling of the self-righteous toward God and the redeemed on account of free salvation. The father's rebuke represents the wrath of God against the self-righteous.

As another illustration of the true method, let us interpret the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. xviii. 21-35). Here the central thought is the obligation of Christians to forgive without limit. The king is God. The servant is man in his relations to God. The great debt is man's guilt. The command to sell the servant

and his family is the sentence of the law on the sinner. The prayer for patience and the promise to pay represent the act of the sinner conscious of his danger. The king's forgiveness is God's forgiveness. The conduct of the servant towards his fellow-servants is the conduct of the Christian who refuses to forgive others. The small debt represents the offense of men against us. The fellow-servants are the saints and angels. The second sentence represents the eternal condemnation of persons who will not forgive those who have wronged them.

As an instance of a parable where all the details are not to be considered as having parallels in the spiritual world, we may take the parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke xvi. 1-9). The central thought is the importance of so using our material possessions that they will inure to our benefit in the world to come. The rich master is God. The accuser of the steward is the law. The account required is that which men must render to God. The servants whom the steward favors are persons whom Christians may serve with their worldly possessions. The steward's expedient represents the timely, wise

use of a Christian's wealth to make friends for eternity. The master's praise is God's commendation of the foresight of Christians who thus use wealth to fill heaven with friends. But notice that it is the foresight, not the dishonesty, of the steward which is commended. He is called "*the unjust steward.*" Why, then, is he taken as an example? Simply because his action illustrates admirably the one point of the necessity of foresight and prudence on the part of Christians. Our Lord takes from the sphere of pure worldliness a natural and probable transaction to teach Christians that they should be as wise in spiritual things as this man was in temporal. Here it is plain that the correspondences cannot be forced beyond the illustration of this single point.

To save space I have condensed these interpretations as much as possible; but they will illustrate the method to be followed in the study of parables.

The figure called *personification* is frequently used in the Bible. Examples are: "The morning stars sang together" (Job xxxviii. 7); "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth" (Isaiah i. 2);

“If these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out” (Luke xix. 40). In this figure inanimate objects are made to act as though they were intelligent beings. In interpreting such expressions it is only necessary to remember that they are figurative.

Strictly speaking, the *proverb* is not a rhetorical figure, though proverbs are generally figurative. The Hebrew word for proverb means *similitude*, and nearly every proverb contains a comparison of some kind. The form is usually that of the *antithesis*, or balanced sentence, which is classified as a distinct figure of speech. “A soft answer turneth away wrath ; but grievous words stir up anger” (Prov. xv. 1), is a good example. In “The name of the Lord is a strong tower ; the righteous runneth into it and is safe” (Prov. xviii. 10), we have the balanced sentence, a metaphor in the first member, and a brief allegory in the second. But the proverbs are easy to interpret, and need no special rules. The same may be said of all the ordinary figures of speech which occur in such abundance in the Bible.

Only one other form of expression demands

our attention in this place, namely, the *symbol*. This can hardly be called a rhetorical figure, and yet it is a highly figurative method of expressing truth. A symbol is a material object, or a transaction in the material world, to represent some truth of a higher and more spiritual nature. The historical and ritual symbols of the Old Testament which point to the nature and work of Christ are called *types*. The Kingdom of David was a type of the Kingdom of Christ. The sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham (Gen. xvii.) was a historical type of the great sacrifice on Calvary. The Jewish high-priest was a type of our great High-Priest. The Temple and its furniture, and the sacrifices and ceremonies of the Jewish worship were nearly all typical of facts in the life of the Christian church. These types throw great light on the doctrines of Christianity and should be carefully studied by every one who would understand its real character. It is usually easy to interpret types, and no detailed rules are necessary. One suggestion should be observed: Not everything in the Old Testament which seems to illustrate the doctrines of the New Testament is to be re-

garded as a type. Only those persons and events can be considered types which were divinely appointed to foreshadow persons and events in the future.

But all symbols are not easily interpreted, and some detailed instruction with regard to them will be necessary. Ordinary symbols may be divided into those which are real and those which were seen only in dreams and visions. It was common for the Hebrew prophets to act out their predictions. We have an illustration of this in the prophecy of Ahijah to Jeroboam (1 Kings xi. 28-39) in which the prophet rent before the future king his own new mantle, tearing it into twelve pieces and giving ten to him, thus signifying that the kingdom of Solomon should be rent and that Jeroboam should reign over ten tribes. There is another illustration in Isaiah xx., where the Lord commanded the prophet: "Go and loose the sack-cloth from off thy loins, and put off thy shoe from thy foot. And he did so, walking naked and barefoot." This was to symbolize the way in which Assyria should lead away captives from Egypt and Ethiopia and to warn Israel against trusting in

these nations for help. There is another illustration of it in Acts xxi. 11, where Agabus takes the girdle of Paul and binds his own hands and feet with it to show that Paul would be arrested and bound at Jerusalem.

Of symbols seen in dreams we have illustrations in the dream of Joseph (Gen. xxxvi. 5-8) in which the sheaves of his brethren "made obeisance" to his sheaf; in Pharaoh's dreams of the seven fat and seven lean kine, and of the seven thin and seven full ears (Gen. xli. 1-8); and in Jacob's dream at Bethel (Gen. xxviii. 10-22) in which he saw a ladder reaching into heaven on which angels ascended and descended. In every case except the last the interpretation accompanies the narration of the dream. The ladder and the angels in Jacob's dream undoubtedly symbolize the fact that the believer may have communication with heaven, sending up prayers and receiving blessings.

Symbols that were seen in vision are by far the most numerous. A familiar example of this is Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (xxxvii. 1-10) to which he was commanded to prophesy in order that they might live and be

clothed with flesh. The bones represent the people of Israel in the deadness of their transgressions. Isaiah had a vision (chap. vi.) in which he saw the Lord “high and lifted up” surrounded by worshipping cherubim, himself a sinner with polluted lips, and one of the cherubim flying to touch his lips with a coal from off the altar that they might be cleansed. This vision symbolized the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, and our need of cleansing by the atonement and by the Holy Spirit’s work before we are fit for God’s service. Another vision of this kind is that which Peter had (Acts x. 9–17) in which he saw a sheet let down from heaven containing all kinds of animals which he was commanded to kill and eat, not regarding any as unclean. He was thus taught to lay aside his Jewish prejudices and admit Gentile believers to the privileges of the Christian church.

The symbols in the book of Revelation belong to this class. They were all seen in vision and in no case represent objective realities. It is a book of symbols and must be so interpreted.

It is needful to say a few words especially on the interpretation of symbols. In this the student of the Bible will be aided by first determining whether the symbol was real, or seen in a vision or dream. This he can do by considering the nature of the subject and the context. In many cases the fact is stated. Then he should be careful not to confuse symbols with plain language, and interpret them as though they were real description or narrative. This mistake has caused much bad interpreting and the promulgation of many false theories. Revelation has suffered more from this cause than any other book of the Bible. The very fact that it is a book of symbols should have guarded interpreters from this danger. And in general one can tell from the connection whether language is symbolical or plain.

In ascertaining the meaning of a symbol we should follow the divine models of interpretation. Many symbols of the Bible are interpreted by their authors. A careful study of these interpretations will greatly aid the student in discovering the true meaning of those which

are not interpreted. He will consider only two examples beyond those already given.

In the first part of Revelation, John sees a vision of Christ in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks and having seven stars in His right hand. The intelligent reader at once perceives that all this, even the description of Christ, is purely symbolical. Christ does not appear in heaven and never has appeared to any one as John describes Him, with white hair and flaming eyes and a sword going out of His mouth. Attempt to conceive of such a figure and the product is revolting. John has simply indicated by this appearance certain qualities and powers of Christ. The whiteness of the forehead and hair symbolizes purity and glory; the flaming eyes symbolize energy; the two-edged sword going out of the mouth symbolizes the power of the word He speaks to destroy error. In the stars and the candlesticks we see symbols of His purpose to give spiritual light. In another vision (chap. xxi.), John sees a city let down out of heaven, made of pure gold and having walls of jasper fifteen hundred miles long and high, and twelve gates of pearl,—a city whose light is the

glory of God and the presence of the Lamb, and whose people are all holy and peaceful and joyous. Here again we must remind ourselves that all is symbol. There was no such city and there never will be in heaven or on earth. By this figure John symbolizes the perfection of Christ's Kingdom in the earth and in heaven. The city is let down out of heaven because that is the source of the Kingdom. The gold and the precious stones and the divine light symbolize the glories of that Kingdom, when all things shall be made luminous by the truth of God. Some of the details of the symbol undoubtedly apply only to the heavenly state; but John's main purpose was to set forth the wonderful results of God's redemptive work as they will appear both on earth and in heaven. Some of the symbols of Revelation we are not able to interpret in detail, and a few seem entirely beyond our present powers of apprehension; but much light is shed on the book by remembering that it is made up of a series of symbols intended to represent the different steps in the progress of Christ's Kingdom.

As a final word I may say: There are a few

things in the Bible which even the honest and intelligent student cannot understand. But they are comparatively unimportant. They do not impair the great body of truth which God has given us in that book. Without these there is enough to make us “wise unto salvation.” Let us regard these most difficult portions as we do the bones which we find in our meat. Let us eat the meat and leave the bones. It is folly to break our teeth trying to make food of them, when we have enough without them.

Of one thing we may be certain, the more we study the Bible with a devout and honest spirit, the more we shall be enriched by its wonderful treasures. We can never exhaust them. In many parts of the Word, new depths of meaning will ever lie beyond our best efforts. Unlike other books it does not grow stale with repeated readings, but ever fresher and fresher, each step we take in exploring it opening before us new vistas of truth and beauty. O blessed book, may we learn to love thee more and more, until we shall have gained the heaven to which thou hast directed us, through Jesus Christ who is thy central glory!

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